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The People, the Revolution

by Mary Farley

(History 2225)

The tenacity of the Russian working class and peasants is well documented in Albert Rhys Williams' *Through the Russian Revolution*. It is an interesting factor in how the Revolution was won, considering how they faced not only the oppressive upper class but also other country's intervention as well. A large portion of what was motivating the rebels was faith and not strictly in the religious sense. Of course a great many in Russia at the time were wholly devoted to the church, still celebrating certain holidays and feasts while the revolution raged on. However, the connection between church and state (as it existed under Czardom) could not continue with the revolution and faith was lost in the Provisional government that had risen. When both religion and the systems of power were failing them, the people of Russia turned their devotion to the idea of revolution itself, instead finding themselves idols to worship and abiding by their own morals.

Williams met with a great many people while journeying through Russia, one of whom was Ivan Ivanov of Spasskoye. Despite being kicked out of Spasskoye for his revolutionist ideas some years ago, Williams' friend Yanishv takes them there and both are welcomed with open arms by Ivan and stay with him and his family. Before eating dinner, the whole family makes a point of performing the sign of the cross and they have a large feast. Williams finds out that they have arrived at the start of "The Feast of Transfiguration"¹ which also entailed much singing and dancing. The celebration rolled over some to the next day, but the propriety of the people won out before long. Ivan led the families to the fields to harvest crops, the celebration over in the wake of the upcoming winter. While the revolution was intensifying around them, the people of Spasskoye maintained their religious and daily customs but their curiosity with Bolshevism was dying to be quenched. As Williams put it, "...more eager to gather stores for their mind than they had been to gather food for their bodies."² Despite hearing Yanishev speak about this subject with great passion (and a weary voice), few to none of the people were initially willing to convert. Their faith in the new system at hand was solid, enjoying their holidays and dutifully working in the fields. This would not last forever, though, as their acute focus on Yanishev's speech hinted.

For the people of Spasskoye, their village would change to Bolshevism eight months after Yanishev returned to them. Around Russia, more working class people were changing their stance on where the government and religion met. Williams speaks with a Russian priest for some time, discovering that old prayers are being changed since God's title as the "Czar of Heaven" is considered to be an insult to the 'creator'. To relate an idol of the people to their greatest enemy has caused much distress for the church, though the old priest was not hopeless. He remarks that, "The Revolution has made havoc with the Faith, yet the masses of soldiers are still religious. Much can still be done in the name of the cross."³ The transition of loyalty between the church and the Revolution was still in progress. The soldiers referenced by the priest were those fighting in a pointless war ordered by the Czar and continued by the Provisional government for the sake of

¹ Albert Rhys Williams, *Through the Russian Revolution* (Bloomington, IN: Slavica Publishers, 2016), 30.

² Ibid., 37.

³ Ibid., 43.

honoring treaties (and reaping the benefits of those treaties). For them, there was nowhere else to put faith in besides religion and a God they had known all their lives, who had not abused them as their Czar had. This would not last, as many fled the battlefield and returned home, ready to fight not against Germans but Kerensky and his government. By October, Williams notes that “Their last shred of faith in the government is gone. They have faith in themselves; faith that they alone can save Russia... faith alone in the institutions of their own making.”⁴ And what is the revolution but an institution of the people?

The people had, according to Williams, decided the Soviets were the best body to represent themselves. The Intelligentsia, who had once made a god out of the people, were quick to change their tune when Soviets were rising to power. Similar to how the people were rejecting god as the Czar of heaven, the Intelligentsia were abandoning the idea that a people could be a deity since they could not control such an entity. It was too late though, as Williams puts it, “Now the people were rising with the wrath and thunder of a god, imperious- and arbitrary.”⁵ When their faith was put in themselves and their fellow man, the people acted like a god and believed themselves one. This is not to say they acted as though they were above the laws of man; on the contrary, they began to self govern. While the Winter Palace was being stormed by men of the revolution from various different backgrounds and occupations, looting broke out. This could not stand, as the image of the Revolution could be hurt and used against them. One Bolshevik working man stood against three soldiers in Williams’ recount, reminding them that “‘You are responsible to the Revolution,’ ...So deadly earnest is he that these men feel in him the authority of the Revolution. They hear and obey.”⁶ Not only are looters stopped in the process, but self-appointed men stand at the exits and search each person leaving the palace to ensure that no trophies leave. Without any police or commanding officer, the people protect the sacred image of the Revolution as they once had the shrines of saints in their homes.

It should be noted that Williams’ interpretation of these events does come with an ironic lens, being that Williams himself was once a minister. He was noted as being doubtful of his ties to the church on more than one occasion⁷ through his six years as a minister, yet greatly relays the Revolution in a faith-based sense. He describes the Revolution with religious terms, using such phrases as “All labor is holy.”⁸ Perhaps his experience with the poor and suffering people around Europe and Russia inspired him to take up the revolutionary faith as well. He certainly sounds devout to the cause when he defines the Revolution as “...the Messiah coming to ‘preach good tidings to the poor; to proclaim release of the captives and to set at liberty them that are bruised.’”⁹ This is not to say that the socialist country he supported meant he had to give up his religious ties. Rather, many of the morals and ideologies of the two overlap. This was not a man jumping ships to a completely different belief system, he was simply placing more importance on the physical world than the spiritual one. The great wave of those inspired by and for the Revolution was not unique to the Russian people, but included an American man like Williams who traded his devotion to God for devotion to the people.

In summation, the faith once held towards God and the Czar was a transferable power held by the people of Russia. When the Czar was finally overthrown after failing them for his entire reign,

⁴ Ibid., 56.

⁵ Ibid., 61.

⁶ Ibid., 70.

⁷ Ibid., xvi.

⁸ Ibid., 73.

⁹ Ibid., 133.

they denied him a place in their lives and the church. As the Revolution continued, they celebrated their religious holidays while devouring Bolshevik ideology. When God did not save them from the battlefields of WWI, they abandoned both and came home, where they put their faith in themselves. The working class and peasants held the Revolution together through 1917 to 1921, self-governing when the image and outcome of the Revolution was at stake; managing to not only inspire each other, but foreigners such as the author himself, Albert Rhys Williams.